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new music

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ratings

★★★★★ Instant Classic
★★★★ Wonderful
★★★ Worth the money
★★ Borrow from a friend
★ Don't bother
● Not if they paid you

Michael Jackson

Thriller 25th Anniversary Edition
Epic/Sony BMG

Speaking of cutting-edge pop (see Simple Plan review, below), the guy who wrote the book has been having a rough go of it for some time now. But Jackson's 1983 classic Thriller was a brilliant blueprint that would be followed for years to come. Much of Mr. Timberlake's reinvention, for example, took direct inspiration from the gloved one. To reissue this album a quarter-century later is a great idea. The problems begin when folks like Will.i.am (who just finished embarrassing himself with a rap at the Grammys), Kanye West and Akon (who don't come off quite so bad), and even (eek!) Fergie attempt to mess with perfection. The first nine songs (i.e. the original Thriller track listing) are divine. Pretty much everything after that (the remixes) is sacrilege. ★★★½
Podworthy: Billie Jean
T'CHA DUNLEVY

Hot Chip

Made in the Dark
EMI

If New Yorker James Murphy's LCD Soundsystem has set the standard for modern electro auteurship, London five-piece Hot Chip isn't far behind. The group does more than just throw down a random pack of club tracks on its latest. It comes up with an innovative, multi-textured collection of songs that, lo and behold, sound very much like an album. Vocals are not tossed about gratuitously but integrated organically. Acoustic ballads and synth-laden breakbeat grooves weave together, as do guitars, blue-eyed soul hooks, new-wave flourishes and a serious dedication to the boogie. It all sounds refreshingly natural and unaffected, making Hot Chip one of the few dance-rock acts keeping it real, for real.
★★★★
Podworthy: Don't Dance
T'CHA DUNLEVY

Hot Chip performs April 15 at Metropolis, 59 Ste. Catherine St. E. Tickets cost $22. Call 514-908-9090.

Devastations

Yes, U
Beggars Banquet

There's more than one style of Euro-drama. Devastations flaunt at least 10 on their sprawling but remarkably cohesive third album. Australian expats now tooling around Berlin and London, the trio walk a different path into an alluringly dark forest with every song, from the slippery dance-clubber Black Ice to Rosa's discordant desperation to Misericordia's haunted wobble. They borrow from the best kindred spirits: Suicide's hissing backbeat, the tattered luxury of Tindersticks. The colour scheme is more blue than black (save The Saddest Sound's razor-blade rhetoric), and while they've been pigeonholed as the next-generation Bad Seeds, trying to force an album with space-funk bass (Avalanche of Stars) and sha-la-las (The Face of Love) into that box is a fool's game. ★★★★
Podworthy: Rosa
JORDAN ZIVITZ

City and Colour

Bring Me Your Love
Dine Alone/Universal

Life's a bitch, then you die, and in between you write songs that teeter between self-examination and self-pity. Alexisonfire's Dallas Green tends to inflate simple insecurity into overwrought "woe is me"-ness, and his public diary entries can be cringe-worthy, more for their melodrama than for their honesty. Still, he has an enviable gift for attractive acoustic arrangements that balance desolation with warmth. His greatest asset, though, may be the yearning tenor that helps to sell more emo than-thou lines like "A coma might feel better than this"; proof of this comes when the Hip's Gordon Downie overwhelms Sleeping Sickness with a foghorn vocal cameo. For better and for worse, Green is vulnerable to the core, which is exactly what these songs need.
★★★
Podworthy: Waiting ...
JORDAN ZIVITZ

Vast

April
2Blossoms

Fans of erstwhile electro-prog-ger and one-man-whatever Jon Crosby, be forewarned: this is your emperor without knobs on. A confirmed monomaniac ("vocals, guitar, piano, organ, percussion, mandolin, hammer and mountain dulcimer by Jon Crosby"), he boils the vast-ness (it stood for Visual Audio Sensory Theatre, I'm afraid) away. Who knew? He has a deep jones for – and a great handle on – mid-tempo '70s folkprog melody and a kind of Jim Morrison moody growl lurking in his voice. The strength of the songs and sly production leaves one suspicious, yes ... because somehow, I can't help believing if this guy every penetrated the franco market, they'd crown him. I also imagine him eventually writing Broadway songs with Bono. ★★★½
Podworthy: You're Too Young
MARK LEPAGE

Buddy Holly

Not Fade Away: Buddy Holly 1957: The Complete Recordings
El Toro

No false advertising here – in fact, "complete" seems like an understatement. On this three-disc, 91-track set, you'll find every immortal song recorded by one of rock 'n' roll's most important figures during his breakout year, plus every session he played – or might have played – for other artists. And it doesn't even stop there: alternate takes of almost everything, radio promo spots (including a few taped at the Montreal Forum), live TV appearances and even a taped phone conversation between Holly and the head of Decca Records, in which Holly tries to get a waiver on a clause forbidding him to re-record anything he cut for the label, only to get treated like a pesky kid. For obsessives, yes, but endlessly fascinating. ★★★★★
Podworthy: Tell Me How
BERNARD PERUSSE

Not Fade Away is available as an import on www.amazon.com.

The Electric Flag

An American Music Band/
A Long Time Comin'
SPV

A Long Time Comin', the 1968 debut album by the short-lived Electric Flag, is a stone classic. With that opening salvo, Mike Bloomfield, Buddy Miles and a horn-rich band served up a shocking mix of blues, Stax-influenced soul, hard rock, pop and psychedelia that didn't take a wrong step. Never again would influences like Otis Redding, Cream, BB King and Frank Zappa seem to blend so naturally. They dubbed themselves An American Music Band, and their irresistible approach to the styles that made their country's music great actually justified that lofty nickname. When Bloomfield left, they released a decent follow up, also included here, but it didn't really come close. Some bands say all they need to say on one album. ★★★★★
Podworthy: Groovin' Is Easy
BERNARD PERUSSE

Monsieur Mono

Petite musique de pluie
Audiogram

Monsieur Mono is the gentler alter-ego of Eric Goulet, leader of Les Chiens and ace local producer. Coming after his leathery, literate group's pearl Rösk and greatest hits disc, this contemporary soft-rock features breathy emo voicings and churchy chorales accompanied largely by string sections directed by Marc Ouellette (who helped on Pierre Lapointe's last orchestral opus). On first listenings it comes across as an oasis in a turbulent world (tipped off by Comme en temps de guerre with tremulous vocals by Ariane Moffatt), buoyed by a stately pace and inner-woven textures. A cross between a prayer and an anti-depressant, it provides utilitarian services (and may be a sleeper hit). But soon its insipid mantra-like lyrics made me long for Les Chiens' bite. ★★★½
Podworthy: Ciel de pluie
JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Catherine Russell

Sentimental Streak
Harmonia Mundi/Fusion III

Catherine Russell mixes blues, jazz, country and folk influences on her second solo album and she's terrific, whether singing an old song written by her father – jazz pioneer Luis Russell – or a new song of her own. Russell is particularly adept singing old classic blues numbers and does wonderful things with Bessie Smith's Kitchen Man, a clever, double-entendre tune that she's arranged for two acoustic guitars and tuba, and Alberta Hunter's My Old Daddy's Got a Brand New Way to Love which she sings on top of Mark Shane's solo blues piano. Although I have a slight preference for the more intimate of the arrangements on this CD, the bigger band arrangements on tunes like Luis Russell's I've Got That Thing are delightful too. ★★★★
Podworthy: Kitchen Man
MIKE REGENSTREIF

Altsys Jazz Orchestra

Watercolours
Swing'in Time

Montreal's Altsys Jazz Orchestra has grown into a first class outfit, as this superb CD, with saxophonist Donny McCaslin makes abundantly clear. The 13-member band, with the city's most active players, is rooted in bop but effectively tackles more harmonically diverse material. Co-led by trumpeter Bill Mahar, the music is arranged to combine the intimacy of a smaller ensemble with the horn-rich sound of a bigger orchestra. It opens with a Coltrane-inspired Body & Soul, featuring McCaslin's broad variations on tenor. He plays soprano brilliantly on Kenny Wheeler's Part 1 of Gnu Suite. Five pieces are Mahar originals, which define the group's forward-looking, expansive character. McCaslin's tenor conversation with Frank Lozano on the title track is outstanding. ★★★★½
Podworthy: Watercolours
IRWIN BLOCK

Bruckner: Symphony No. 7

Orchestre de la francophonie canadienne, Jean-Philippe Tremblay, conductor
Analekta

Imagine. Two modern made-in-Quebec Bruckner's Sevenths to choose from. Jean-Philippe Tremblay might not have the current celebrity bling of Yannick Nézet-Séguin, but he has produced a coherent performance that stresses clarity and structure over reverberance and spirituality. Many tempos have a quickstep feel, and themes unfold with a logic that – somehow – does not negate their spacious beauty. The strings and brass of the Orchestre de la francophonie canadienne get it together sonically as well as rhythmically. I could quibble over a few climaxes and rushed phrases, but patriotism is by no means the only reason to acquire this disc.
★★★½
ARTHUR KAPTAINIS

briefly noted

★★★ Kate Maki: On High (Ow Om). The potent Sudbury country-folkie gets a lesson in the power of dry heat from cryptic producer Howe Gelb (Giant Sand). JZ

★★½ Willie Nelson: Moment of Forever (Lost Highway/Universal). Some of the tracks on this album – like Keep Me From Blowing Away – are vintage Nelson. But some songs seem to have him trying too hard to get back on country radio; he should be beyond caring about that. MR

★★★★ Horace Silver: Live at Newport '58 (Blue Note). Hard bop lives in this little classic of Silver playing four pieces of Silver, with Louis Smith (trumpet), Junior Cook (saxophone), Gene Taylor (bass), and Louis Hayes (drums). IB

★★½ Supreme Beings of Leisure: 11i (Ryko). If trip-hop is dead, nobody told L.A.'s SBL. Smooth female vox and safe beats make this an oddly out-of-touch release that nonetheless manages some almost-pleasant moments. TD

★★★★ Various Artists: Classic African American Gospel (Smithsonian Folkways/Koch). The recordings on this rousing collection of authentic African American gospel span a half-century, from the 1940s through the '90s, and includes powerful choirs like the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and Saturday night blues singers, like Sonny Terry, singing their Sunday morning material. MR

ALLEN McINNIS THE GAZETTE
Simple Plan, from left Chuck Comeau (drums) Jeff Stinco (lead guitar), Pierre Bouvier (vocals), Sebastien Lefebvre (guitar), and David Desrosiers (bass).

Same old sound? Not so much

Simple Plan

Simple Plan
Atlantic/Warner
★★★½

T'CHA DUNLEVY
GAZETTE MUSIC CRITIC

You've gotta feel for Simple Plan. Even after selling over a millions copies of its 2002 debut No Pads, No Helmets ... Just Balls, the Montreal pop-punk act was largely unknown in its hometown. Playing arenas everywhere else, the band had trouble filling 2,000-capacity Metropolis here.

That changed in 2005, when the tour for its followup, Still Not Getting Any, finally landed the group a sold-out gig at the Bell Centre. That night has since been cited by bandmembers as a hands-down career highlight.

And yet there remained a nagging hankering for something called artistic credibility. Roundly (and rightly) slammed for its cloying, after-school special lyrics and paint-by-numbers pop, Simple Plan got no respect.

This was particularly true in Montreal, where bands like Godspeed You! Black Emperor, Bran Van 3000, Arcade Fire, the Dears, Stars and the Stills got our city hailed as a hotbed of indie-rock creativity.

Like the downtrodden protagonists in the band's songs ("How could this happen to me?" Bouvier sang, in Untitled) Simple Plan simply did not fit in with the cool crowd. Which is a lot easier to swallow when you're packing stadiums from here to Japan as one of the world's biggest rock bands.

Or is it?

When it came time to record this third album, The boys reportedly grew tired of their trademark sound. Initial demos were scrapped, and a hotshot producer – Nate "Danja" Hills, who, along with mentor Timbaland, is known for helping squeaky-clean pop stars (Justin Timberlake, Nelly Furtado and, er, Britney Spears) revamp their sound – was called in.

But Hills tellingly produced just three tracks. And even those songs were subsequently made to sound "more rock" in post-production. In other words, the guys went half-way, and stopped.

There are surprises on this ambitious, self-titled album – funky beats, inventive hooks and sonic twists that try hard to pull Simple Plan out of its teen-angst bubble. At the same time, you can feel the band's concern about keeping its core audience; and that holds it back.

Did Justin Timberlake – whom the group has repeatedly named as an influence in its new direction – hold back when he wanted to step away from his boy-band past with *NSYNC? Hardly.

He let Timbaland and boundary-pushing producers the Neptunes commandeer his solo debut Justified. But even that was but a warmup for 2006's awesome FutureSex/LoveSounds, a perfect fusion of cutting edge and candy coating.

So perhaps there is hope for Simple Plan. The guys may use this as a springboard, and take more chances next time around. In the interim, we get an interesting album in which the group toys with possibilities – trying new things, flirting with something bigger and bolder, but ultimately reverting to what it knows.
Podworthy: Generation

words & music

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I had to laugh at the queasiness – shock but not awe – that greeted Herbie Hancock's winning best album honours at the Grammys, the first time in 43 years that a "jazz" album has done so (since the evergreen Getz/Gilberto). That he won over two hype-heavy favourites, Amy Winehouse and Kanye West, only added to the satisfaction.
JUAN RODRIGUEZ

I am listening, as I sometimes do, to the Metropolitan Opera. Wagner's Die Walküre, the one with the Ride of Valkyries.
So keep reading, because you don't want one of these chicks mad at you. Take it from someone who knows.
ARTHUR KAPTAINIS

CANWEST NEWS SERVICE
Herbie Hancock

POP MONTREAL
Ron Sexsmith

GETTY IMAGES
Billy Joel

Ron Sexsmith described his just-completed album, Exit Strategy of the Soul, as "kind of a crazy record" during a Gazette telephone interview yesterday. ...
What he means is that the new disc, produced by Martin Terefe, is looser than his last album, Time Being. "I love (that album)," he said, "but it's a much more polished thing. This is a lot more chaotic."
BERNARD PERUSSE

I like Billy Joel. I like his songs. I like his iconoclasm, (temporarily) retiring from pop music to go classical (even if his classical album was a snoozer).
And I like his attitude, which – despite frequent lapses into know-it-allness – has led him in the past to condemn wallet-gouging concert prices.
So I was disappointed – but not surprised – to see that the tickets for his April 23 Bell Centre show are going for as much as $149.50.
JORDAN ZIVITZ

For the full posts excerpted above, and much more, go to our Words & Music blog at montrealgazette.com/music.

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